John Kelman

The Word of the Lord Endureth Forever

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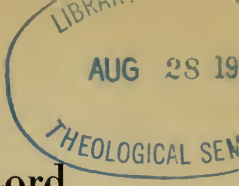

The Word of the Lord Endureth Forever

A SERMON

Delivered in the
Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
New York City
Sunday, December 7, 1919

By the Pastor, the
REV. JOHN KELMAN
D.D.

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By Rev. John Kelman, D.D.

The Word of the Lord Endureth Forever—I Peter 1 : 25

YOU have in your hands the most wonderful thing in all the world. It is a sword for smiting and a refuge from the sword. It is the profoundest mystery and the clearest revelation. It is the most terrifying book in the world and also the most comforting. It is the most human thing on earth and also the most divine. Some years ago Dr. Horton in his Yale lectures created much controversy by his insistence upon the larger significance of the phrase, *the Word of God,* which he widened to include the whole revelation, both in and out of the Bible. It is a valuable and a much needed correction of a somewhat narrow interpretation of revelation, and it is quite true that, as the apostle says, *the Word of God is not bound*—not even in the boards of a sacred book. Yet, while the phrase covers a far wider area than has often been assigned to it, it is true that it is very specially applicable to the Bible. There was a certain stretch of human history in which revelation was paramount and different from the revelations made to man either before or after. There was a certain nation which God specially chose as the medium of His revelation of Himself to the world. Many of the thoughts and words of that revelation were written down, some in history, some in poetry, some in other literary forms. All that literature, collected and preserved

for the use of future generations in the volume which we call the Bible, is so distinctive and unique that it is perfectly legitimate to call it *par excellence* the Word of God.

The history of the Bible is very remarkable. The Jews received it from generation to generation, and after they had got the writers killed and buried they systematically began the idolatry of the book. They counted not its words only or its chapters, but its very letters, with a superstitious and unintelligent reverence which distracted the attention of men from its real value and message. Yet even to that very meticulous care we are debtors. Had they not preserved it with such superstitious reverence it might never have survived to reach our hands and eyes. The early Christians, to whom the Gospels were sent and the epistles written, took them in their free, human way, accepting them as part of their ordinary life. They read them, not as things apart, but as letters and documents from friends, and so gave the whole that natural treatment and reception which brought upon their lives the spirit of those holy books.

Many of the early Christian fathers were mystics, who saw in the sacred writings more than the unsophisticated could read there, and invented systems of symbolism which made of the plainer statements of scripture a kind of cryptogram for the initiated. In their time also there was introduced the influence of the Greek philosophical spirit, which built up the thoughts and expressions of the Bible into complex dogmatic, and credal form.

The Roman Catholic Church of the middle ages showed its reverence for the Bible by the elabora-

tion and exquisite beauty of its illuminated parchments; but it took over the right of interpretation from the individual to the Church, and, having reserved this right, it used the Scriptures for its own ecclesiastical ends.

The Reformation re-opened the Book for common people and proclaimed the liberty of each man to interpret God's message for himself. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, Protestantism had developed a hard and lifeless orthodoxy which practically, though not confessedly, re-closed the book. From this, individuals with strong imagination and fervent faith, broke loose in fantastic private interpretations, went out to seek strange things, and found exactly what they sought. Now in these latter days people are recognizing at last that this is not a repository of proof texts, nor a hunting-ground of strange prophecies, but a national literature, expressing and recording God's eternal and growing revelation to living men.

The sense of the value of the holy Scriptures has not only revived, but it has spread throughout the modern world. Recent voices of all sorts might be quoted bearing proof of this. The testimonies of Professor Huxley, Matthew Arnold and Lord Morley are familiar. M. Renan has called it "The great book of consolation for humanity." President Roosevelt has said of it, "No thoughtful man can doubt that to decrease the circulation and use of the Bible among the people would seriously menace the highest interests of civilized humanity." President Lincoln's presidential addresses could never have been written but for its inspiration. Not the least impressive of the modern American testimonies to the Bible are the words of Mark Twain who said,

"Who taught these ancient writers their simplicity of language, their felicity of expression, their pathos, and above all their faculty of sinking themselves entirely out of the sight of the reader, and making the narrative stand out alone and seem to tell itself?" In recent days we have those remarkable testimonies of General Foch, Lord Haig, Lord Roberts and others, which are well known and often quoted. General Pershing has said to his soldiers, "Hardship will be your lot, but trust in God will give you comfort; temptation will befall you, but the teachings of our Saviour will give you strength." Admiral Sims has added his testimony that "This Testament is a handbook of manhood; it introduces you to the pattern Man, Who shows you what to become and the way to become it."

These are very remarkable testimonies and they prove that the Bible has *power over time,* as one has said. There are, however, a few voices on the other side. One prominent leader of popular thought has told us that he thinks otherwise. He says, "Floods of sincere but unmerited adulation have been lavished upon the Hebrew Bible. The world has many books of higher literary value. . . . Carlyle is more moral than Jeremiah; Ruskin is superior to Isaiah; Ingersoll, the atheist, is a nobler moralist and a better man than Moses. . . . Sir Thomas More, Herbert Spencer, Thoreau, Matthew Arnold and Emerson are worth more to us than all the prophets." Who is this gentleman of such original literary and moral taste? All his friends answer with one accord, "An honest man." We do not deny it, but it may be permitted to us to remark that there really are other qualities which have some

value in dealing with such subjects besides honesty. For my part I am a little tired of honest men who use their honesty as an excuse for talking mischievous nonsense. Imagine for a moment what Thomas Carlyle or any literary man of first rate competence would say if he were to read such an account of himself, and to find himself pilloried in any such comparison. Our author has quoted Ruskin as superior to Isaiah. Set against that extraordinary quotation this from Ruskin's own pen: "I opened my Bible just now, yellow now with age, and flexible, but not unclean, with much use. . . . My mother's list of chapters, with which, learnt every syllable accurately, she established my soul in life, has just fallen out of it. . . . This material instillation of my mind in that property of chapters I count, very confidently, the most precious, and, on the whole, the one essential part of my education."

The Bible has been translated into 436 languages. It holds its sway from Norway to Madagascar, and literally from China to Peru. In Hankow during one year the printing-press published 1,500,000 of it. For the past hundred years in every land its sales have been steadily growing. In one year recently the British and Foreign Bible Society alone published portions of Scripture at the rate of one for every five seconds, day and night; and in the 100 years of its existence it has sent out over 200,000,000 of copies. The New York Bible Society, which is today celebrating Bible Sunday in so many pulpits of our city, has had a long and distinguished career. Its yearly distribution numbers practically 500,000 volumes in fifty-three languages. It puts these into the hands of sailors on ships in the harbor,

and immigrants on Ellis Island, and soldiers in the Army, and sailors in the Navy. It has done much work among the blind by means of Scriptures published in their type. It distributes the Bible free to those who cannot afford to buy it, but it has proceeded upon the wise principle that its output is always measured by its income, and it never goes into debt.

Let us think once more what this wonderful book has survived. The flying sketch of its history given a few pages earlier must have suggested this to readers, but it is worth our while to remember in detail the extraordinary career of this book.

First, it has survived persecution both from pagans and Mohammedans, which has only endeared it to those who have suffered for it, and to those who have received it stained by the blood of others who died in its defence. It has been subjected to ridicule from the days of Celsus on through those of Voltaire to the diminishing stream of such pleasantries which still trickles in outlandish places. Men have laughed at the book for nineteen hundred years, and when their laughter proved unavailing, now and again they have turned spiteful. But the Bible has gone serenely on, unaware of all that laughter, like the Master Himself Who, *passing through the midst of them, went His way.*

Again, the Bible has suffered from much misinterpretation. The subtleties of allegorizing have in each age tended to withdraw it from the understanding of the plain, average man, insisting that the sentences of the Scripture meant not what they said but something else, which could only be explained by those who had the clue. Not less hostile to its

real effect have been the subtleties of theologians who have turned the warm-blooded records of experience into the statements of a cold metaphysic. Such influences as these would long ago have sent any other book to the dustiest shelves of old libraries. But the plain man still possesses this book and understands it quite well. He shakes his head over high-sounding theories about it and says he leaves all that kind of thing to scholars. But when the evening falls and the lamps are lighted, he puts on his spectacles and *reads his Bible.*

In the third place the Bible has suffered from the false protection of the Church. The Roman Catholic has claimed the exclusive right of interpretation, and has withdrawn it from the average man, except as the Church chose to interpret it. The underlying principle of this policy is that the reader must accept the Bible because the Church tells him to do so, while the sounder principle of Protestantism is that we accept the Church in so far as the Bible and our own experience tell us to accept it. To accept the Bible upon the authority of the Church is about as intelligent a principle as that which is said to have convinced some savage tribes who confessed their belief in the truth of the Bible after they had seen magic lantern slides depicting its scenes. Our contention is that the Bible finds confirmation in the spiritual experience of men of all generations, and so confirms its claim to be the authentic Word of God to man.

Once more the Bible has suffered from the false claims put forth on behalf of it by its friends. In a mistaken attempt to emphasize its sacredness, many good people have reduced it to a mere collection of

individual and independent texts which have produced a dead book, inconsistent with itself and presenting no intelligible unity of thought or progress of revelation. Instead of that we hold that the Bible is the living revelation of God's word at work upon a nation's soul, presented to us at the various stages of that nation's development, and culminating in the perfect vision of the word made flesh in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Any of these mistaken methods would have been enough to ruin the influence of any other book. It would seem as if its friends and its foes alike had been working for its destruction. There has been no other book which has been so unintelligently dealt with and none which has been so variously interpreted. The open knife of Jehudi has been always hacking at it; the Bible has been burning in every age, and yet it is not consumed. This is a stupendous fact in literature. It is an absolutely unique phenomenon in the history of books. In view of this the question inevitably arises, Why has this book survived? What is the secret of its vitality? And the answer is, that each generation finds it equally quick and powerful. In the great story of Nansen's *Farthest North* one of the dreariest and most pathetic touches is that which records that in the two years when Nansen and Johansen travelled together through the long nights and days of the Arctic, their only literature was the Nautical Almanac. Contrast that with such stories—and they were very frequent—as that of the soldier in the recent war who discovered for the first time the Gospel according to St. John, and was found reading it over and over again as the most amazing piece of writing he had ever seen.

What then is the secret of this book's marvelous power?

1. *Men find themselves in it.* The search for oneself is old as humanity, and there is nothing in ancient Greece so characteristic as the answer of the oracle of Apollo, Know thyself. It was a great oracle but it was no guide; and men going down from Delphi with these words in their ears were bewildered rather than instructed. But in the Bible is found a guide to self-knowledge as well as a demand for it. It reveals to men both their actual and their ideal selves, their sins and their possibilities, their conscience and their hope. Thus it has educated the world, not by any one set of texts so much as by the general effect which its perusal has had upon the generations. It has given to man a fuller, saner and more accurate account of himself than all other literature has given. When they read the works of Browning or Tennyson or any other of the great secular writers, certain men find themselves, when they are in certain moods; but in the Bible all men may find themselves, whatever mood they may be in. It is this self-discovery, reaching down to the depths of conscience and up to the heights of aspiration, which is the first great service which the Bible has done for humanity.

2. *Men find their fellowmen in the Bible.* In our estimate of our fellows we are like blind people groping in a world of misunderstandings. Now and again a finger-tip strays upon a face, or a hand touches a hand in the dark. But it must be confessed that we have little real understanding of each other apart from some authentic guide. The literature of all nations has earnestly tried to reveal to us our unknown neighbors and make us familiar

with our fellowmen. Yet we have never quite found them, and to a large extent we continue to live alone, whether in gaiety or in austerity, while the procession of other mortals passes by. Still more is this the case with regard to those whom we think of as hostile to us or as strangers. Very few people even try to understand the point of view of such outsiders with any seriousness or thoroughness. They are simply left alone, catalogued as enemies or as aliens, hated, or maligned, or feared, but never understood. Still more isolated are the dead. They have passed from us out into the darkness, and the heart of many a mourner knows how sadly they are cut off from the land and the converse of the living, in that strange world of being or of nothingness into which no safe pathway leads.

Into all this world of isolation the Bible has entered. It brings with it a new world of human fellowship and understanding. It tells us how we may consider our neighbor in the sense of trying to get at his point of view, to put ourselves in his place and imagine how we should feel and think about things if we were he. It is not too much to say that while each of us must necessarily abide in the solitude of our own personality to a great extent, yet the Bible has revealed us to each other as far as it is possible for any soul thus to be revealed. As to the aliens and the enemies, the Bible has convinced us that they too are human creatures and must be regarded as such. They may have to be vanquished, but they may also be won. They have human hearts and consciences, human experience and destiny, just as we have, and until we have sought and found them, under the guidance of Jesus Christ, we have not fulfilled the true law of life.

As to the dead, an instance in the career of Dr. Egerton Young seems to express all that needs to be said. He was visiting a tribe of Eskimo Indians among whom there had been of late a plague which slew great numbers of their children. The tribe sat around him as he talked to them about the gospel, with stolid indifference, and frowning faces. His Bible again came to the rescue, and a sudden inspiration led him to spring up and shout aloud to them, *I know where your dead children are!* From that moment he had them in his hand.

3. *Men find their God in it.* There is a characteristic story of the War which tells how one man in the Highland Light Infantry was shot in the battle of the Aisne, but the bullet struck a Bible which he carried in his breast pocket and penetrated a certain distance through the pages. When he opened it he found that the text at which its impact had stopped was, *Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well for so I am.* We are all of us aware, not only of our solitariness among other mortals, but of the awful solitude which surrounds us in this most mysterious universe. The vast empty spaces through which we move with our wheeling earth strike the imaginative spirit with a sense of loneliness that might almost bring madness, were it not that we are all aware of something which seems like a spiritual presence, hidden indeed and yet mysteriously at work, around us. This presence is suggested in nature. It is felt in all high and serious art. It explains the true meaning of the sense of high comradeship felt by the scientific man when he discovers new wonders in the make of things. Great and tragic instances, such as the recent war, seem to con-

vince large masses of men of its reality and power. Yet in all these ways it is an indefinable and indefinite thing, a conviction that never focuses itself into clear and sharp-edged experience. Now, the wonder of the Bible is that it focuses this vague sense of God until a living face looks out at us from every page of the book. To study the Bible is not to read a book; it is to be arrested by a personality. We do not believe in God because the Bible tells us that He is there; we believe the Bible because in its pages we find Him unmistakable and clear. For we know the voice of God when we hear it. There is something in human nature that responds to His appeal. No part of life is intelligible until it has found its counterpart in the divine, and this is precisely what the Bible does for man. Luther insists upon this and repeats it and re-repeats it in his own fashion: *Thou must thyself decide, thy neck is at stake, thy life is at stake. . . . Thou must boldly and definitely say, That is God's Word and on that will I risk body and life.* That is what is meant by that grand old phrase, *The Word of God comes home to me.* It is a case in which deep answers unto deep, in which the soul recognizes the meaning of its own experience, and that which has been a vague and half-conscious sense of indefinable presence changes to the glow of recognition and the thrill of love.

Any part of the revelation recorded in the Bible is in its measure capable of doing this, and actually did it to the people of the time when it appeared. But most especially, and for all time, this has happened in the revelation of Jesus Christ. In the Bible He appears as the revealer of God and the interpreter of human life. The person of Christ has often been

discussed, but one cannot help feeling that the main thing needed is that the Bible, which describes Him, should be read so that men may find out what He actually is reported to have said and done, and the impression which He made upon those who stood nearest to Him and understood Him best. But for the Bible Jesus Christ would now be a mere name which signified practically nothing. Through the Bible He is today, to a far wider circle than ever in the past, the power of God unto salvation.

What then is the relation of all this to ourselves and our own lives? We have all heard stories of people who have paid enormous sums of money for rare editions of the scriptures whose fictitious value depended upon some printer's error or some odd expression. Such collectors are not necessarily careful readers of the book, and are reputed sometimes to be so proud of their possession, and so afraid of losing it, as to lock it away in some strong safe. Like them we too have paid a dear price for our Bible, or our ancestors have paid it,—a dear price, not in money only, but in blood and tears. Have we paid that price only to boast of it is a possession and to lock it away in places where it is never read? And, if that is all, has the historic price of the holy scriptures been worth while? If we lock the scriptures away in the safe of our praise, our approval, our admiration, we may get them out of our way just as securely as if we had them in the deepest of safety vaults. A famous young blood in Oxford is reported to have boasted to one of his professors of the enormous number of his books and to have asked the professor what he would advise him to do with them, to which the laconic reply was, "I would advise you to read them." So our first duty and wisdom is to

read the Bible—to read it not as a compliment to its author, but for our own souls' sake; to read it in order that we may be educated men and women—in order that we may discover ourselves, and one another, and our God; to read it, not as a last resort when we have nothing else to read, but as the exercise upon which our highest interests depend, as the experiment on whose issue all that makes life permanently worthy and blessed hangs. Having read the Bible, it is our business first to see that we understand it, not in any recondite, or conventional, or traditional sense, but in a frank, human understanding of words that were obviously meant to be understood. Next it is our duty to obey it and then to send it on. That is the object and justification for all Bible Societies. They are not repositories and distributors of so much paper and printer's ink. They are guardians and heralds of a vital spirit, which, coming out upon the world from God, redeems the world through all its generations.

Yes, and the question changes. We have been discussing what we are to do with the Bible. It will be well for us if we remember that there is another question, namely, What is the Bible going to do with us? Christ said long ago, *The word that I have spoken unto you, the same shall judge you.* It is true that the word of Christ is not only a strict but also a merciful judge. Yet every Bible, shut or open, neglected or studied, is a judgment-seat for men; and it will be well for us indeed if our treatment of this book, both in respect of our private use of it and our distribution of it to others, may stand unashamed before the judgment-seat of Christ.

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